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ABILITIES  
*in Harmony*  
SHOW CHOIR CAMP  
2018

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2018



# CONNECTED BY COMPASSION

Abilities in Harmony  
Helps Campers Flourish

by Cassidy Clevenger





We have all been in situations where we feel like we do not quite fit in. I know for me, when I started college, I had my heart set on becoming a physicist. And despite all of my advisor's recommendations, I registered for a myriad of math and sciences courses I was ill-equipped to take in my freshman year. About a month later, I was texting my mom from a bathroom stall, sobbing, because I received my first (and only) "F" on an exam. I ended up changing my major and getting a medley of various awards and academic honors by the time I graduated with my psychology degree. The point being, I did not do poorly in chemistry because of any sort of personal failing; I was simply trying to learn and think in ways that my brain was not designed to do.

So often, we are expected to learn certain things in specific ways, and those who are different are left to their own devices to figure problems out. Then, on the other side of the spectrum, there are people like Sierra Lyon who are there to ensure nobody feels left out. In her camp, Abilities in Harmony, she and her team strive for an all-inclusive experience for anyone who loves to sing and dance, and provide them a platform to shine upon.

### The Early Days of the Camp

Abilities in Harmony is an adaptive, progressive show choir camp aimed at promoting community, diversity, and connections among students with varied ability levels. The camp was started in Onalaska, WI, by Sierra Lyon in 2017. Lyon was inspired to create this opportunity for middle and high school students after a life-changing experience abroad.

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As a freshman in college, Lyon lived with an American family in Haiti while they were on a mission trip, and she spent a lot of time with the family's six children. Among the children, one daughter has Down syndrome, and one of the sons has Down syndrome, autism, and sleep disorders. During her time with them, Lyon saw how much they loved music, singing, and dancing, and was inspired to share this joy with other, similar students back home in Wisconsin.

### The Camp Experience

Abilities in Harmony is a week-long show choir camp ending with a stage performance. Every year, the camp has a different theme, with the most recent one being an 80s theme. These students learned a fifteen-minute showcase including three delightfully retro hits. All the campers are paired with either a show choir alum or college student studying either music or education. The campers all have some form of special needs, with the most common ones being Down syndrome, autism, cerebral palsy, or other general developmental delays. All the campers have appropriate accommodations met so they can highlight their inner starlet and perform with confidence.

### The Power of Support

When Lyon returned home, she reached out to her former high school show choir director, Richard Moses, and he fully supported her endeavors. Onalaska High School, Lyon's alma mater, was the first school to host Abilities in

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According to Lyon, Balsamo taught her that anyone, at any level of talent and ability, can dance and deserves a solo. Now, if any student wishes to have a solo performance during the recital, they are encouraged to step into the spotlight and bust out their best moves.

Harmony, and they showed their support for the project by giving them a free space to practice and perform during camp.

In addition to the support Lyon received from Moses, Nikki Balsamo, Lyon's former dance teacher, has been pivotal in helping Abilities in Harmony grow. For instance, Balsamo has been one of the key figures in helping Lyon set up camps at different schools. Along with providing tangible support, Balsamo also helped shape Lyon's worldview on performing. According to Lyon, Balsamo taught her that anyone, at

any level of talent and ability, can dance and deserves a solo. Now, if any student wishes to have a solo performance during the recital, they are encouraged to step into the spotlight and bust out their best moves.

The camp has also been met with incredible dedication and assistance from the campers' parents—these parents were critical for fundraising in the camp's early days. Now, the camp is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, and runs largely on donor support, grants, and sponsorships.

## Growth

When Lyon started Abilities in Harmony, she originally planned for the camp to be a one-time event. The first winter camp was originally comprised of eight students, and due to its success and positive feedback, the camp had doubled in size by the following February. The camp is continuing to grow in size, popularity, and locations, which has led to the camp expanding to multiple cities in Wisconsin and Minnesota.

There have been four camps held at Onalaska High School thus far. Other communities have taken notice of this joyful event, and therefore Lyon and her team are working with the schools to bring a camp into their area. Lyon and her team are currently hosting five different camps between the two states, and she and the team travel to all of them. Lyon hopes that one day other schools will be driven to host similar events, and students across the country can partake in their own Abilities in Harmony camps.

Lyon is currently only twenty-one years old, and is still attending college at Viterbo University. Not surprisingly, running a nonprofit while in school comes with a special set of challenges. For example,



The advertisement features three women standing against a blue background with musical notes. The woman on the left is wearing a long, flowing blue dress. The woman in the middle is wearing a long, flowing black dress. The woman on the right is wearing a long, flowing black dress and is looking up at the woman in the middle. In the top right corner, there is a logo for "BAND-MART" and "CHOIR-MART" in blue and white. Below the logo, the text "Concert Wear & Accessories" is written in a white, cursive font. At the bottom right, the website "bandchoirmart.com" and email "support@bandchoirmart.com" are listed, along with the phone number "888-345-1848".

Lyon noted that all these camps consistently happen simultaneous to her semester finals. However, as Lyon looks back on previous camps and plans for the next round, she is adamant that the stress is well worth the outcomes.

She has been met with steadfast support, encouragement, and love from the campers and their families. In working with the campers, she has learned a lot about herself; she has a newfound understanding of what it means to be appreciative and patient. Lyon believes that her experience with Abilities in Harmony has inspired her to take life one step at a time and has ultimately helped her grow as a person.

### Challenges and Advice

Lyon explained that working with students with such a wide variety of abilities and preferences can prove to be tricky at times, which is why practicing patience is such an invaluable skill. Her main point of advice to anyone who is interested in starting their own performance-based nonprofit is to be brave and ask for help.

Lyon spoke proudly and openly about the support she had along the way from her



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former teachers and other friends. Those involved in helping the camp grow have assisted in everything from funds, to resources, to website logistics. It's okay to not know how to do something or to need help in executing a task.

Abilities in Harmony serves as a reminder to all of us that it is okay to ask for help and accept our limitations at times. For example, a camper may have difficulty with a certain dance move, so their friends and support team may try and help them with accommodations; if the move is still undoable, that is okay—how about a solo move so they can blow the audience members' socks off in a different way?

Facing challenges head-on is how we grow and discover our talents, preferences, and values. Through this camp experience, not only has she helped campers build their confidence and take pride in their abilities, she has also refined her values and discovered traits in herself. It's not about being the best; it's about being your best.

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**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:** Cassidy Clevenger is a Samford University alum. She is currently in graduate school at Samford in the MSW program, while working as a staff writer.

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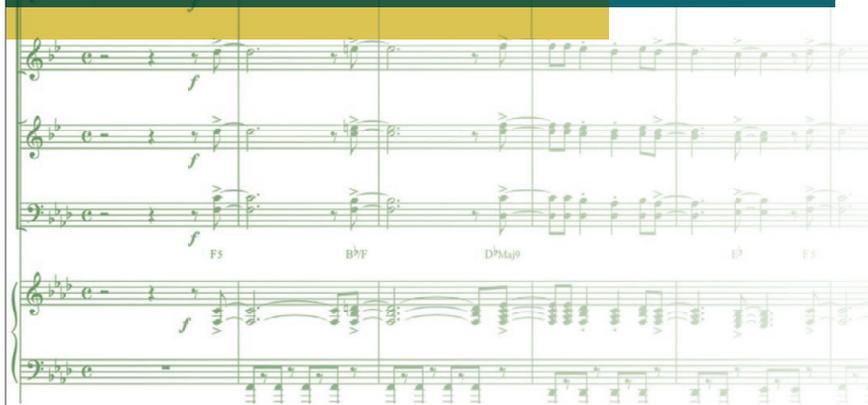
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